

VZCZCXRO8896

PP RUEHAG RUEHBI RUEHCI RUEHDBU RUEHLH RUEHNEH RUEHPW RUEHROV RUEHSL
RUEHSR

DE RUEHAH #1128/01 2471228

ZNY CCCCC ZZH

P 041228Z SEP 09

FM AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3413

INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE

RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE

RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE

RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 5628

RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 3347

RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 3211

RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 3871

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC

RHMCSUU/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL

RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC

RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC

RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC

RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC

RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 3866

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 001128

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/CEN; DRL/IRF

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/03/2019

TAGS: [KIRF](#) [PGOV](#) [SCUL](#) [SOCI](#) [TX](#)

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: A DISCUSSION AT THE COUNCIL ON
RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS

REF: ASHGABAT 322

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Sylvia Curran, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY. According to its deputy chairman, one of the primary roles of Turkmenistan's Council on Religious Affairs (CRA) is to explain legal requirements related to religious activity, especially the registration process. The revision of the current law on religion, adopted in 2003, is a work in progress, with the aim of bringing it in conformity with international norms. There are 123 registered religious organizations in Turkmenistan, 100 of which are traditional (Muslim, Russian Orthodox) faiths. During 2008, no religious organizations were registered, and one group has been registered so far this year. The majority of the country's mosques are considered too small to register and are led by elderly volunteer imams. While the law stipulates that the CRA should ensure the implementation of constitutional rights and guarantees in the area of religious affairs, in practice, it serves as a government mechanism to control religious practice in the country. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) On September 3, poloff met with Council on Religious Affairs Chairman Charygeldi Seryayev and CRA Deputy Chairman Nury Gurbanov to discuss the CRA's role and the current state of religious affairs in Turkmenistan. As to the role of the CRA, which reports directly to the president, Gurbanov described it as a coordinating organ between the government and religious groups. He highlighted the CRA's function of providing consultations to religious groups to explain legal requirements related to religious activity, especially the registration process, about which he noted the Ministry of Justice ("MOJ") also provides consultations. According to the registration process, an organization first submits its application to the CRA for review. Gurbanov said they "find a lot of mistakes," but when the documentation conforms to legal requirements, the CRA forwards "well-prepared" applications to the MOJ for its review and decision. The CRA also deals with registered religious groups as problems arise. (NOTE: According to the 2003 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations ("Law on Religion"), the CRA must approve religious education, including the persons who teach religious subjects, and the importation of religious literature. ENDNOTE.)

13. (C) Gurbanov recounted a brief overview of religious practice in Turkmenistan since the final days of the Soviet Union. During the Soviet period, only Islam and the Russian Orthodox Church were allowed. There were only four mosques in Turkmenistan. Other religious groups were dealt with harshly. In 1990, the first religion law in Turkmenistan was adopted, which was subsequently amended regularly until the new law was adopted in 2003. Gurbanov mentioned the 2007 visit by members of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom and the 2008 visit by UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief Asma Jahangir as having contributed positively to dialogue about religion, and noted that all international norms concerning religious freedom will be included in an eventual new law.

14. (C) Currently there are 123 registered religious organizations in Turkmenistan, 100 of which are traditional (Muslim, Russian Orthodox) faiths, according to Gurbanov. During 2008, no religious organizations were registered. So far in 2009, one group has been registered, and two others are being considered. He then went on to single out the unregistered Jehovah's Witnesses, saying they violate traditions and laws, create "family questions and scandals," and make a "crude" impression on people. He emphasized, however, that Turkmen society is very tolerant. Finally, he noted that it is important to know the mentality of the people, and that it is not possible to "just impose foreign laws." Rather, there is a need to "act wisely," observing international norms, but at the same time, considering the impact on society.

ASHGABAT 00001128 002 OF 002

15. (C) Since there are many more mosques than there are registered organizations, Gurbanov explained that only large mosques are registered. Smaller mosques, or houses of prayer ("dom molitvy"), are not considered organizations. They may or may not have a resident imam, depending on the number of worshippers. Most of the houses of prayer are located in rural areas, staffed by volunteer imams who are elderly and survive on their pensions and material support from their families. At the larger mosques that are registered, the imams are not state employees, but rather are paid by their respective religious organizations. Likewise, the mosques are not state-owned, but belong to the religious organization.

16. (C) Gurbanov was not familiar with the July 2008 Analysis of the Law of Turkmenistan on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations, prepared by a U.S. professor on behalf of the International Center for Not-for-Profit law as part of a USAID-funded legal reform initiative. (NOTE: The report was handed over to Institute for Democracy and Human Rights Director Shirin Akhmedova last year. END NOTE.) Gurbanov said the government's effort to revise the existing 2003 Law on Religion was already underway, but still needed more time. This effort is the result of President Berdimuhamedov's order that Turkmen legislation conform to international norms. He added that he considers analysis by and discussion with foreign colleagues useful.

17. (C) COMMENT: While theoretically the CRA is accountable directly to the president, we also understand that the CRA falls under the purview of Deputy Chairman Hydyr Saparlyev, who is also responsible for education, health and science. Given Saparlyev's generally cautious, risk-averse track record in overseeing his portfolio, it is no wonder that so many issues related to the status and rights of religious organizations remain unresolved. As in a previous meeting (reftel), Gurbanov, unsolicited, demonstrated special antipathy for Jehovah's Witnesses, whose application for registration is currently being reviewed by the CRA. Although the law on religion outlines that the CRA should play the role of defender of and advocate for religious rights, in practice, the council operates as a government arm to control and restrict religious activity. END COMMENT.

